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Social media, protest, & outrage communication in Ethiopia: toward fractured publics or pluralistic polity?

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ABSTRACT

In 2018, Ethiopia experienced a tectonic political shift following the culmination of years of public outcry against the now defunct ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Protest groups, predominantly organized along ethnic identification, have used social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to disseminate strategies, recruit members, and galvanize support. Anchored on theories of collective identity and moral outrage, this study investigates the role of social media platforms in mobilizing Ethiopians toward political reform during the protest and post-protest periods demarcated by the ascent of Abiy Ahmed as the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia. Data generated from a mixed method approach consisting of an online survey and interviews indicate social media platforms played a crucial role by drawing Ethiopian youth to participate in political discourse, empowering formerly marginalized groups to influence policy, and fostering ingroup cultural/political cohesion. However, evidence indicates participation opportunities created by social media platforms also brought apprehension including the rise of outrage communication as manifested by inflammatory expressions, hate speech, and political extremism. By proposing *outrage communication* as a viable construct that captures this phenomenon, I argue, in the context of a polity embodying highly heterogeneous and competing collective identities – ethnic or otherwise – such as Ethiopia, social media platforms are likely to increase ingroup political participation but chronically diminish outgroup engagement.

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Collective identity; Ethiopia; outrage communication; protest; social media

Introduction

Between 2012 and 2018, Ethiopia experienced a wave of protests that targeted the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Ethiopia's ruling party between 1991 and 2019, which has led to major changes in the nation's dominant power structure. These protests have brought, among other things, the ascent of Abiy Ahmed as the new Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) in April 2018. During the culmination of the protests in 2018, protests groups such as *Qeerroo* of the Oromo and *Fano* of the Amhara,[1] which were largely organized along ethnic identification, used social media and instant messaging platforms to recruit and organize

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members. These groups have remained active, albeit fragmentedly, in the post-protest period,[2] mostly demanding increased political agency and ethnic empowerment. The purpose of this study is to examine how social networking sites (SNSs) were used during the Ethiopian protests and how the function of these platforms evolved in the post-protest period that has been marked by ethnic tensions. While the use of digital platforms to bring about social change and emancipation in the African context is not new (e.g., Bosch, 2015; Chiumbu, 2012), the current inquiry offers insights into discourses of competing narratives of collective identity.[3] A notable characteristic of these communicative phenomena is digital outrage, which oftentimes migrates to offline outrage in forms of conflict and violence.

In interrogating how SNSs, particularly Facebook, have been used as platforms of protest communication, and later as sites of competing discourses of statehood, citizenship, and collective identity in Ethiopia, the study identifies two organizational timeframes, namely protest and post-protest periods. These periods are demarcated by the beginning of Abiy Ahmed's tenure as Prime Minister of FDRE. Through a mixed-method approach that primarily involves an online survey and in-depth interviews,[4] the study addresses the following research questions: (i) In what ways did Ethiopians use social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter during the Ethiopian protests? (ii) How do college-educated Ethiopians describe the evolution of social media political discourse in the post-protest period? (iii) What are the implications of identity-based organizing in social media platforms for democratization and nation-building? I will start by discussing the nexus of collective identity and moral outrage as the theoretical framework that anchors my analysis. Then, with the aim of situating my discussion within the pervading political and social contexts of SNSs' use amongst Ethiopians, I will provide an overview of causes, consequences, and stakeholders of the Ethiopian protests between 2012 and 2018. This section will also offer insights about emerging ethno-political ferments in the post-protest period. Next, I will outline my methodological considerations. Finally, I will present my findings before I confer remarks about the potential implications of this study on the growing research agenda of SNSs and political communication in the Ethiopian context.

Social media, collective identity, & moral outrage

A good deal of scholarship has interrogated – and quite successfully established – the links between social media and social movements (e.g., Bennett et al., 2014; Tufecki & Wilson, 2012). However, most approaches have focused on strategic, applied, and/or instrumental aspects of these dynamics. Noting this trend, Gerbaudo and Treré (2015) argued that research on the nexus of social media and social movements needs to pay attention to the complexity of the phenomenon, especially when it comes to our understanding of expressive and performative elements. Specifically, they singled out the importance of interrogating the role of collective identity in social movements and examining what 'opportunities and threats the new media ecology brings to processes of identity construction in contemporary protest movements' (p. 866).

Scholarly interest in collective identity as an agent of collective action grew as an alternative to dominant instrumental approaches such as resource mobilization theory that did not meaningfully address expressive, performative, and cultural components of

social movements (Melucci, 1996). Although the notion of collective identity is highly contested, Melucci (1996) describes it as 'an interactive and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientation of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their action takes place' (p. 70). Emphasizing the significance of commonalities of members, Snow (2001) argues the essence of collective identity resides in 'a shared sense of "one-ness" or "we-ness" anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of "others"' (p. 2213).

Engaging with the notion of collective identity is particularly relevant in Ethiopia where the question of nations and nationalities has arguably occupied the country's political agenda for decades now, especially since EPRDF's ethnic federalism system was put in place (e.g., Abbink, 2011). Tensions of competing nationalisms and nation-building in Ethiopia are increasingly evident in online discourses in recent times that often escalate to inflammatory, inciteful, and hate speech. In this sense, it is not surprising that a growing list of scholars have interrogated competing political discourses in Ethiopia's burgeoning digital communication sphere (e.g., see Di Nunzio, 2014; Gagliardone et al., 2016; Gagliardone et al., 2019; Gagliardone & Pohjonen, 2016; Mossie & Wang, 2018; Skjerdal & Gebru, 2020). Nonetheless, the rise of antagonistic expressive forms in digital spaces is not a uniquely Ethiopian experience. There is growing global evidence on the relationship between social media proliferation and occurrences of political extremism, partisanship, and rage culture (e.g., Postill, 2018). This phenomenon is closely related to the notion of moral outrage,

> a response to infringements or transgressions on what people perceive to be the immunities they, or others with whom they identify, can expect on the basis of their rights and privileges and what they understand to be their reasonable expectations regarding the behavior of others. (Goodenough, 1997, p. 5)

Moral outrage is not self-reflexive but rather outward looking, seeking to designate misconduct on the 'other.' In the context of collective identity, outrage plays a crucial role in maintaining internal cohesiveness but can be detrimental for intergroup relations as it can exacerbate conflict with the 'other,' who, through a dehumanizing rhetoric, will be at the receiving end of harm in a form of verbal aggression or violence. In interrogating the role of technology on outrage culture, Crockett (2017) asked whether digital media is a gasoline to the culture of outrage that he likens to fire. While moralistic punishment can be helpful in holding bad actors accountable (Spring et al., 2018), this approach's limitations became evident in the context of digital communication. For example, Crockett (2017) notes online social networks may collectivize users in echo chambers with sympathetic audiences. In addition to reducing empathetic communication with other groups, this scenario allows outrage communicators to hide in like-minded crowds with minimal risk of backlash. Crockett also identifies empathetic distress as another cost of outrage communication online. He argues online networks 'reduce empathic distress by representing other people as two-dimensional icons whose suffering is not readily visible. It's a lot easier to shame an avatar than someone whose face you can see' (Crockett, 2017, p. 270).

The political and social significance of Ethiopia's protests (2012–2018): from *Dimtsachin Yisema* to #OromoProtests

When Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Hailemariam and his military regime, commonly referred to as the *Derg*, were ousted in 1991 after years of debilitating civil war, most Ethiopians – despite clouds of uncertainty – experienced a brief moment of relative optimism about their collective prospects. Some of the constitutionally guaranteed reforms that restored freedoms of assembly, speech, and association enforced by the victorious EPRDF seemed to chart a democratic itinerary for the Ethiopian polity that historically lived through oppressive periods of feudalistic monarchical absolutism and communist totalitarianism. These promises were short-lived, however, as EPRDF resorted to repressive practices that dissolved budding democratic indicators of free press, political plurality, and civic organizations (Teshome, 2009). Although opposition against EPRDF was not uncommon prior to the death of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012, protests and protesters were swiftly and violently contained, mostly through the federal government's security apparatus. In the years after the death of Meles Zenawi, the frequency of public demonstrations of grievance on corruption, state-sponsored violence, and maladministration increased. Coupled with the federal government's shrinking power and EPRDF's internal power struggles, protests became commonplace across the country, culminating in a sweeping political change in 2018.

The origin of the series of nationwide protests that engulfed Ethiopia between 2016 and 2018 can be traced back to 2012 when Ethiopian Muslim protesters organized large scale peaceful demonstrations opposing government interference in religious affairs, especially in the community's governing body, the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs. Referred by its organizers as *Dimtsachin Yisema* ('Let Our Voice be Heard'), Ethiopian Muslims' nonviolent protest was arguably the first major organized public dissent against Meles Zenawi's administration, which had outlawed critical public demonstration since the controversial 2005 national elections that resulted in the death, imprisonment, and exile of thousands of Ethiopians (see Reuters, 2007). Although the government attempted to quell the protests by arresting leaders of the movement and using excessive force against demonstrators, *Dimtsachin Yisema* gained traction in the years to come as Muslims nationwide joined the movement to demand release of arrested leaders as well as end of government interference in religious affairs.

By mobilizing Muslims across the country, *Dimtsachin Yisema* undoubtedly carried a profound significance to the community. More importantly, however, the symbolic resistance it projected to other groups with grievances toward the government cannot be overlooked. It eroded the myth of untouchability EPRDF had built around itself, and inspired others to organize around issues important to them. For example, in June 2013, opposition group Semayawi Party ('Blue Party') held a large rally against the government demanding the release of political prisoners and an end to chronic unemployment and corruption, among other things. Attended by thousands of protesters, the rally, the biggest in eight years, marked the first government permitted public demonstration since 2005. As with *Dimtsachin Yisema*, the government responded by deploying its security apparatus in the aftermath of the rally, which resulted in the arrest and physical assault of several members of Semayawi Party as well as the raid of the organization's offices and confiscation of its equipment.

The public resistance against EPRDF's rule set off by *Dimtsachin Yisema* and Semayawi Party preluded what would arguably be the most consequential social movement in modern Ethiopian history, the #OromoProtests (Figure 1). The #OromoProtests broadly refers to a series of rallies and other forms of defiance against EPRDF's rule by Oromos between 2014 and 2018. Although the immediate cause of the #OromoProtests in April 2014 was related to public outrage against the probable displacement of Oromo farmers from their lands if the planned expansion of the capital city's municipal boundary into the Oromia Regional State was put into effect, the movement can be seen as a culmination of Oromos' historical and contemporary grievances against the Ethiopian state. Though Oromia is Ethiopia's largest regional state and Oromos constitute the largest ethnic group of the Ethiopian federation, many Oromos have lamented what they saw as the systematic marginalization of the Oromo people from mainstream political, social, and economic facets of Ethiopian statehood. Since EPRDF came to power, many Oromo politicians, activists, intellectuals, and students were imprisoned, exiled or killed for their alleged affiliation with outlawed opposition group Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) or instigating a *tebab* (narrow-minded) secessionist agenda, a common tactic of stamping out dissent. EPRDF was also reasonably successful in its attempt to divide-and-rule by pitting Oromos against Amharas, two of the largest ethnic groups in Ethiopia, and casting the two groups as perpetual adversaries, thereby significantly limiting cross-ethnic solidarity against Tigrayan dominance (e.g., Tsega, 2018). Despite government crackdown on protesters and arrest

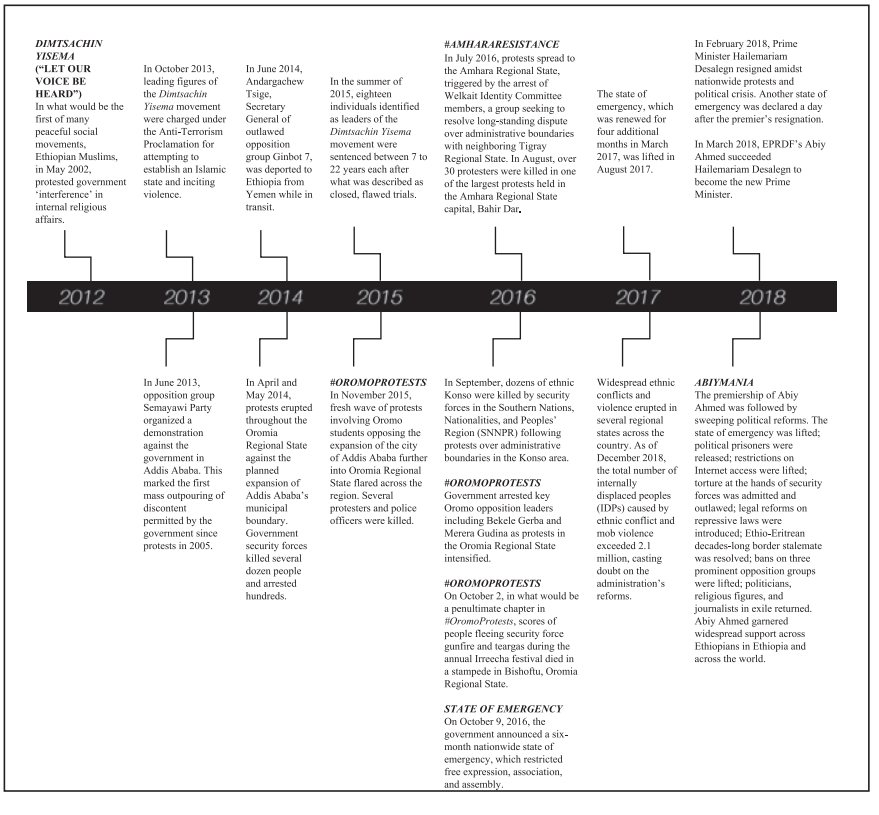

Figure 1. A timeline of protests, social movements, and reform in Ethiopia (2012–2018).

of the leadership of legally registered opposition parties such as the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) in 2016, several students across high schools and higher learning institutions in the Oromia Regional State continued to demand the release of political prisoners as well as the termination of a controversial city expansion plan.

Alongside the intensified occurrence of the #OromoProtests, 2016 witnessed the origins of the #AmharaResistance and consolidation of Amhara nationalism. The immediate cause of the July 2016 protests in the Amhara Regional State were largely attributed to the arrest of the Welkait Identity Committee members, a group tasked with resolving administrative boundary and identity grievances against the neighboring Tigray Regional State. Amhara nationalists contend EPRDF has systematically marginalized them from meaningful political representation and severely undermined their economic prospects. More importantly, they believe EPRDF advanced an anti-Amhara agenda by painting them as *timkihitegna,* a word routinely used in the party's discourse to describe Amharas as arrogant vanguards of Ethiopian nationalism who oppressed other ethnic groups. This rhetoric, they argue, has endangered Amhara lives, as they were routinely displaced in parts of the country where they are an ethnic minority. Amhara protests denouncing these conditions were met with aggressive government response, which resulted in several deaths and hundreds of arrests. This has arguably brought Amhara nationalism movements from the fringe to the mainstream as influential groups/political parties such as the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) were formed.

Although public demonstrations of EPRDF discontent flared up sporadically across the nation, it wasn't until October 2017 when dozens of people fleeing security force gunfire and teargas during the annual *Irreecha*[5] festival died in a stampede in Bishoftu, Oromia Regional State, that a sense of inevitability in political reforms was on the horizon. EPRDF attempted to make a last gasp effort to contain the nationwide fallout by declaring a 6-month state of emergency (which was later followed by an additional 4 months) with very broad restrictions on speech, communication, assembly, and association. Nevertheless, EPRDF's aggravated internal tensions saw two of the party's member organizations, the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), both defunct now, form a strategic alliance to end the decades-old dominance of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the coalition. EPRDF's internal power struggles as well as the nationwide anti-government protests came to an end when Abiy Ahmed of OPDO succeeded Hailemariam Desalegn, who resigned, to become the new Prime Minister. Abiy Ahmed quickly emerged as a reformer whose rhetoric made an explicit departure from EPRDF's ethno-nationalist essentialism, which was evident when he successfully dissolved EPRDF's coalition of ethnically organized parties and formed a new cohesive organization, the Prosperity Party (PP). His sweeping political reforms resulted in the end of the state of emergency; the release of political prisoners; support for repeal/reform of restrictive legal frameworks; acknowledgement and end of government-sanctioned torture and rampant human rights abuse; normalization of relations with neighboring Eritrea; and return of exiled politicians, journalists, activists, religious institutions and political parties. These reforms have afforded Abiy Ahmed widespread acclaim even amongst some of the harshest critics of EPRDF, resulting in what some commentators referred to as 'Abiymania' – a period that marked the first six months of the new prime minister's tenure when the majority of Ethiopians in Ethiopia and across the world, oftentimes divided into political, religious, and ethnic enclaves, demonstrated near-universal hope, excitement, and unity on their collective prospects.

However, as national elections draw closer, Abiymania has waned substantially. Various ethnic conflicts in different regional states that resulted in the death and displacement of people have eroded confidence in the federal government. Politically, TPLF's split with Abiy Ahmed's administration became insurmountable when the former decided not to join the newly formed Prosperity Party. As a result, the relationship between TPLF and the federal government is very tense, with sentiments in favor of regional autonomy articulated by many Tigrayan politicians gaining significant traction amongst their constituents. The Prime Minister is also facing serious opposition within the Oromo political community, with influential figures such as Jawar Mohammed and political parties such as the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) presenting formidable challenges to the Prosperity Party's foothold in the Oromia Reginal State. With comparable trends in the Amhara Regional State and Addis Ababa involving NaMA and Balderas, respectively, Ethiopians' relationship with the Nobel Peace Prize winning Prime Minster is more complicated than the euphoric sentiments of Abiymania in 2018.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-method approach of data collection involving an online survey and in-depth interviews. The online survey targeted college-educated, 18 years old or older Ethiopians who used Twitter and/or Facebook. For the purpose of this study, 'college educated' embraces individuals whose educational level ranges from any college credit experience to completion of a doctorate degree. The survey adopted a voluntary/convenience sample of participants who self-select into the questionnaire. Participants were initially

Table 1. Demographic distribution of survey participants.

Item	Categories	%	*n*
Gender	Male	76.6%	498
	Female	23.4%	151
		100%	649
Employment status	Employed for wages	63.8%	416
	Self-employed	15.3%	99
	Student	13.5%	89
	Current not working	3.1%	21
	Other	4.3%	28
		100%	653
Education status	Some college credit, no degree	6.6%	43
	Trade/technical/vocational training	0.6%	4
	Bachelor's degree (BA, BSc, BEd)	36.7%	245
	Master's degree (MA, MSc, MPhil)	42.5%	282
	Professional degree (MD, JD)	2.1%	14
	Doctorate degree (PhD)	9.6%	64
	Other	1.8%	13
		100%	665
Place of residence	Ethiopia	63.9%	424
	Outside of Ethiopia	36.1%	240
		100%	664
Nationalistic identification	I strongly identify as Ethiopian	52.7%	350
	I feel very strongly about my regional/linguistic/ethnic identity	4.5%	31
	Both my ethnic identity and my Ethiopian heritage are equally important to me	29.2%	193
	I reject to identify with any form of collective identity	8.4%	56
	Other	5.1%	35
		100%	665

recruited through the personal Facebook and Twitter pages of the principal investigator (PI). Participants were also invited through: (a) network recruitment where the PI's social media friends/followers shared the recruitment post/tweet to their networks; and (b) selected influential social media political commentators (5000 or more followers) who agreed to disseminate the invitation to their networks. The survey, made available in English and Amharic, contained 27–29 closed-ended/Likert-type items that asked respondents about their views on social media use and political discourse in the Ethiopian social media ecosystem. By the end of the data collection timeframe, 688 individuals completed the survey (see Table 1 for demographic distribution of participants).[6]

The survey results were further refined by data generated from interviews. In addition to offering a richer understanding and contextual insight, the rationale of using interviews stems from recognizing the demographic limitations of the online survey.[7] In addition, as an Amharic speaking, educated, multi-ethnic male whose belonging in the Ethiopian polity is informed by a 'constructivist' optics,[8] I acknowledge my positionality might have limited diverse demographic recruitment as well as data interpretation. To mitigate this, I conducted 22 individual in-depth interviews at different intervals between August 2018-May 2019 with influential Ethiopian social media political commentators, policymakers, journalists, and educators who come from varying political persuasions. The interviews – most of which needed to be transcribed and translated into English from Amharic – were embedded in the analysis from the survey results. In using interviewees' responses, my approach is to limit excerpts to the most relevant verbatim quotations. In addition to data generated from the interviews, I employ textual and visual artefacts drawn from the public Facebook public profiles of some of Ethiopia's ethno-political community pages.

Analysis

Social media use of educated Ethiopians during the protest period: active spectatorship, passive citizenship?

Survey results showed college educated Ethiopians preliminarily used social media platforms such as Facebook as information gateways to learn about the protests. When asked about what kind of sources they used for staying up to date about Ethiopian domestic news, social media platforms were selected in the 'always' category more prominently (43.4%) than newspapers and magazines (5.7%), news websites (20.8%), and daily television and/or radio news (26.4%) (Figure 2). Although respondents self-identified as high-degree social media users, most (48.2%) can be categorized as lurkers (see Williams et al., 2012), people who post occasionally or not at all but are known to read/consume others' postings regularly (Table 2). Lurkers are contrasted with posters, people who participate often and actively.

Responses to additional survey items that directly probed educated Ethiopians' use of social networking sites (SNSs) in protest contexts demonstrate Facebook and Twitter were used substantially as sources of news about the protests. Although there was evidence of activism and advocacy during the protests (using hashtags related to a political/social issue, changing a profile picture to show support for a cause, encouraging others to take actions that are important to them, etc.), the majority of the respondents (32.2%), when

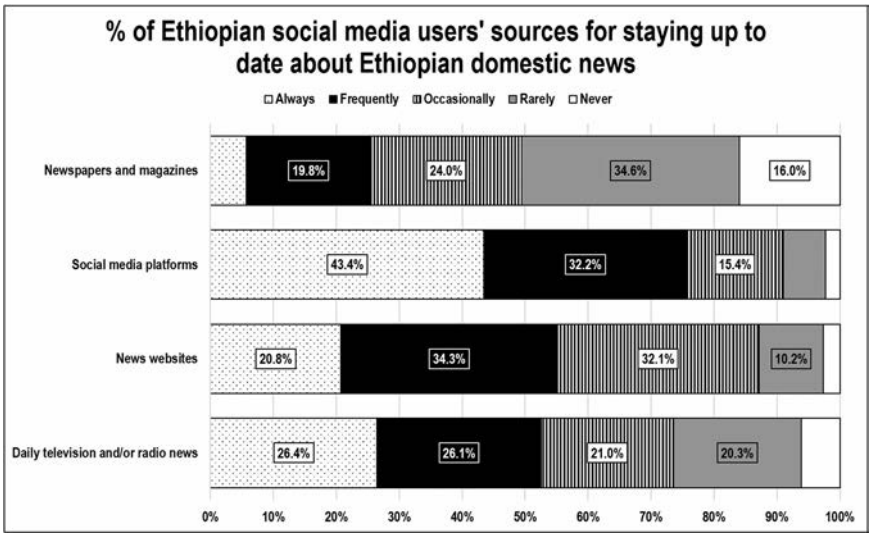

Figure 2. Ethiopian social media users' domestic news sources.

asked about activities they have performed on social media during the time of the protests, identified 'looked up information on local protests/rallies' as their most routine social media activity (Figure 3). More significantly, when asked about whether they participated in any offline civic activity (attending public events, court proceedings, rallies, public lectures/debates, etc.) during the pinnacle of the Ethiopian protests in 2018, only 34.6% responded affirmatively.

Although using SNSs as sources of news and information gathering is not mutually exclusive from social movement participation, educated Ethiopians' overwhelming

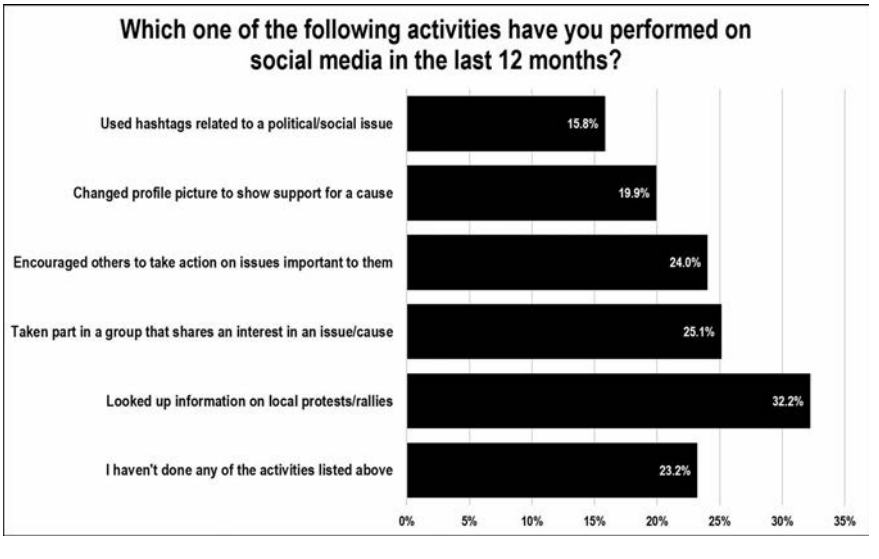

Figure 3. Social media users' activism performance.

Table 2. Respondents' self-identification of usage and behavior on social media.

Item	Categories	%	*n*
Frequency of social media use	Everyday	87.1%	576
	A few days a week	11.2%	75
	Once a week	1.5%	11
	Once in several weeks	0.3%	2
		100%	664
# of followers across all social media platforms	Less than 100	17.9%	118
	Between 100 and 499	27.1%	179
	Between 500 and 999	16.7%	109
	Between 1000 and 1999	14.3%	93
	Between 2000 and 5000	14.9%	99
	More than 5000	9.1%	60
		100%	658
# of Facebook accounts per user	0	5.4%	35
	1	81.6%	541
	2	10.3%	67
	3	1.2%	8
	4	0.6%	3
	More than 4	0.9%	6
		100%	660
# of Twitter accounts per user	0	21.6%	142
	1	75.6%	496
	2	1.5%	10
	3	0.6%	3
	4	0.3%	2
	More than 4	0.3%	2
		100%	655
How do you describe the people you follow in your social media platforms?	They mostly hold similar political views like me	20.2%	68
	They mostly hold opinions that oppose my political views	3.3%	22
	They come from diverse political views	76.5%	508
	I keep away from Ethiopian politics	9.9%	66
		100%	664
What kind of social media user are you?	I do not participate often. I spend most of my time reviewing and consuming other people's posts	48.2%	318
	I am a balanced user. I post, participate, and consume equally	36.6%	241
	I spend most of my time posting my own views/content	6.0%	40
	I spend most of my time commenting and reacting to other people's posts	4.9%	32
	I spend most of my time sharing/retweeting other people's/organization's posts	4.2%	28
		100%	659

identification with the former rather than the latter is indicative of how they performed tacit support rather than active participation in the Ethiopian protests. It should be noted that the reliance on social media platforms for news and information gathering in the context of authoritarian states is not a uniquely Ethiopian experience (e.g., Wall & El Zahed, 2015).

As one informant who self-identified as an Oromo rights activist described, the protest that brought about political reform in Ethiopia is a result of grassroots consciousness and organization of Oromos who believed their historical marginalization from the Ethiopian political and economic center a result of their Oromo identity more than any other factor, thereby warranting an identity-based social movement anchored in *Oromummaa*:[9]

> During the Oromo Protests, some of the questions that protesters raised including displacements of Oromos from the surrounding suburbs of Addis Ababa due to urban development directly affected poor farmers and their families. This resonated with many Oromos across

> the country who saw the proposed Master Plan as yet another incident in a pattern of systematic marginalization of Oromos from political and economic empowerment. As a result, they became direct actors in the opposition movement against the government. Although urban and educated Ethiopians especially in the capital city also have profound economic grievances related to issues of exorbitant housing, surging inflation, and unemployment, their participation in the protests was at best verbal. This is probably because they were policed more stringently. Regardless, the site of the protests was in the regions, not the center. (personal communication, 9 April 2019)

The diminished role of educated Ethiopians, especially academicians, in social movements is attributed to several factors. One of my interviewees, a historian and an active participant in Ethiopian political discourse on SNSs, argues serious academicians see social media as 'a digital ghetto' where there is no regard for scientific reasoning and argumentation. The disengagement of the educated elite is a departure from previous social movements such as the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, where college students at Addis Ababa University, inspired by Marxist-Leninist writings, understood and aggressively used student publications such as *Democracia* to disseminate their protest communiqués. According to an informant who has more than 10,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter, the academic flight from social media platforms is a missed opportunity. 'This is where the governing ideals of the nation are being conceived, developed, and packaged for delivery. This is where the agenda is set.' Other informants, especially those who self-identified as critical to Ethiopia's ethno-nationalist federal structure, dispute the assertion that educated Ethiopians are not actively involved in Ethiopia's social movements. They contend that several protests between 2016 and 2018 erupted in high schools and higher learning institutions because these institutions are natural organizing sites that can easily accentuate online calls for social movements to become offline protests. The problem, they contend, is not that the educated elite are not participating, but that they are participating in a manner that fuels outgroup ethnic derogation.

Social media and political discourse in the post-protest period: toward fragmented cohesion and outrage communication

The first four months of the post-protest period were marked by widespread – albeit brief – optimism partly due to cross ethnic solidarity of Oromo and Amhara elites who embraced the leadership of newly appointed Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. However, the few months of euphoric 'Abiymania' started waning when ethnic-inspired displacements, killings, and mob violence spread rampantly across the country. In August 2018, dozens of ethnic minority citizens were killed, churches were burned, and shops were looted by the organized group *Heego* in the Somali Regional State's capital, Jigjiga. In what came to be commonly referred to as the Burayu Massacre, scores of ethnic minorities were killed at the hands of youth mobs in the Oromia Regional State's Burayu district northwest of Addis Ababa. Displacements of Amharas from Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromos from Somali Regional State, and Gedeos from Oromia Regional State left millions homeless. These intergroup tensions that defined post-protest Ethiopian domestic people-to-people relations were evident in digital spaces. The political discourse on social media platforms was fashioned along ethnic lines with pages that draw large followers such as *Bête Amhâra*, *Gulele Post*, *Tigrai Online*, and several others. Most of these pages served as platforms for discourses espousing ethno-nationalistic victimhood and

empowerment (see Figure 4 for a montage of Facebook posts of Ethiopia's ethno-nationalist communities). One notable outcome of this arrangement is the rise of outrage communication amongst different online ethnic groups and between ethno-nationalist and pan-Ethiopian users.

A former blogger (self-described as someone who advocates for individual liberty and doesn't want to be associated with any form of collective identity – ethno-nationalistic or otherwise) argues the rise of 'ethnic cliques' is making people indiscriminately defend ingroup members/actions and vociferously attack outgroup users/groups:

> Such is the toxicity of political discourse in Ethiopian Facebook I have substantially disengaged from my active participation. A few years ago, I used to write political and social commentary extensively. Now, it is difficult to have a serious conversation on social media

Figure 4. A collage of contested Ethiopian ethnic nationalisms on Facebook. Top: A Facebook post by ቤተ አማራ or Bête Amhâra, an Amhara nationalist community of 265,630 followers as of June 2019. The post laments the 'continued massacre' of ethnic Amharas by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and calls upon Amharas for a resistance movement. Bottom left: A very popular Tigrayan nationalist Facebook page for tägarus in Ethiopia and overseas, 'Tigrai Online' has 95,060 followers and advocates for 'Tigray First' agenda that pushes for the creation of an independent Tigray Republic. Bottom right: Followed by thousands of users, 'Ayyaantuu Oromiyaa' is one of the many Facebook groups advocating for Oromo nationalism. In this post, Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, an Oromo, is depicted as a traitor who is likened to Menelik II, an Ethiopian Emperor who is perceived by many Oromo nationalists as an enemy of the Oromo people.

> because the first thing that gives me away is my name. My name's linguistic and ethnic affiliation has become the optics through which people see me. Not my writings, not my arguments, not my activism track record. A few months ago, when I wrote a critical piece on a horrific public execution of a young man by a mob, I was bombarded with "traitor" messages, some of which amounted to threats, from people who felt I shed a negative light on their ethnic group. Groups created their own information ecosystem. There are Oromo pages, Sidama pages, Amhara pages, Somali pages, Tigray pages, and so on. The messages on these platforms, some of them can be deemed as hate speech. This has made groups to see each other with mistrust. (personal communication, 13 April 2019)

The rise of identity-based social media outrage and outgroup hate discourses in Ethiopia is not an isolated phenomenon. Wodak's (2019) conceptualization of the 'post-shame era' as well as Golec de Zavala et al. (2019) notion of 'collective narcissism' note similar observations in global scenarios.

To examine possible outcomes of outrage culture, respondents were asked to disclose if they have ever blocked someone from accessing their social media profile/posts during the post-protest period, to which nearly two thirds responded affirmatively. When probed to justify their actions, respondents who performed block functions identified dissemination of false/misleading information (33.3%), frustration on pessimism (22.1%), and annoying views (16.1%) as their main motivations. Similarly, 64.8% of the respondents reported they deactivated, considered deactivating, or took a break from at least one social media account in the post-protest period. The majority (40.8%) of these respondents said social media made them feel pessimistic, followed by 33.1% who reported they could not find value from social media anymore.

Despite evidence of fatigue due to outrage communication, taking the result of the survey at a surface level can be misleading. For several of the interviewees who stated they attach a great deal of significance to their ethnic/linguistic identity, social media has brought a sense of fraternity and cohesiveness to their groups. They argue Facebook has afforded them a space to navigate their identity, learn about their cultural group, and become 'unapologetic' about their cultural/artistic expressions. One of my interviewees, a North America-based active participant of online *tägaru*[10] groups such as *Tigrai Online*, dismisses the 'divisiveness' of Facebook communities and argues these groups play an instrumental role in community building and organization:

> I think it is important to take criticism of people organizing based on their linguistic and cultural identities with a degree of suspicion. I feel I am more informed about my *tägaru* heritage now than ever before. And there is no doubt my membership of *tägaru* groups on Facebook helped fortify this consciousness. The collectivization of *tägarus* on social media is not a rejection of *Ethiopiawinet* but rather a celebration of *tägaru* heritage. Digital communication has allowed us to form a stronger alliance to celebrate our culture, our language, our history. I think this is true for other groups too. Understand that the criticism is mostly coming from people who have a monolithic view of this country and who have nostalgia for previous regimes that instituted a dominant cultural, political, and economic ideology. (personal communication, 12 July 2018)

Collective identity in the Ethiopian social media sphere: implications for democratization and nation building

Although the rise of outrage communication in the Ethiopian social media ecosystem's political discourse has undermined earlier optimism about the potential of SNSs as

alternative political speech platforms in a highly authoritarian context, the perception of educated Ethiopians on this dynamic is not universal. For example, when asked whether social media do more to help or hurt democracy in Ethiopia, a slight majority (52.9%) declared 'social media hurt democracy in Ethiopia more than it help it' whereas 47.1% of respondents reported 'social media help democracy in Ethiopia more than it hurt it.' This mixed view on social media's role on democratic values was also apparent in another survey item that attempted to measure the level of agreement of respondents to different, even competing, perspectives. The result shows respondents demonstrated a very high degree of agreement ('Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree') to both celebratory (e.g., 'Social media make it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their actions', 'Social media give voice to underrepresented people', and 'Social media highlight important issues that may not get a lot of attention otherwise') and critical ('Social media make people think they are making a difference when they really aren't', and 'Social media distract people from issues that are truly important') views on social media (Figure 5). While the mixed views may give the impression that respondents have divided perspectives, it can be argued that the result is indicative of the realization that social media can simultaneously foster and undermine democratic values. This duality of social media's role is closely captured by Thierer's (2010) notion of 'pragmatic optimism,' which contends that the Internet and digital technologies 'are reshaping our culture, economy and society – in most ways for the better (as the optimists argue), but not without some serious heartburn along the way (as the pessimists claim)' (p. 60).

As one of the founding members of a prominent political blogging group described, the proliferation of Facebook, limited as it was, was embraced enthusiastically by individuals like himself around 2010 when social media offered not only a space to exercise restrained forms of speech but also organize to bring about social change in the context of authoritarian regimes. He starts by recounting the inspiration born out of digitally supported

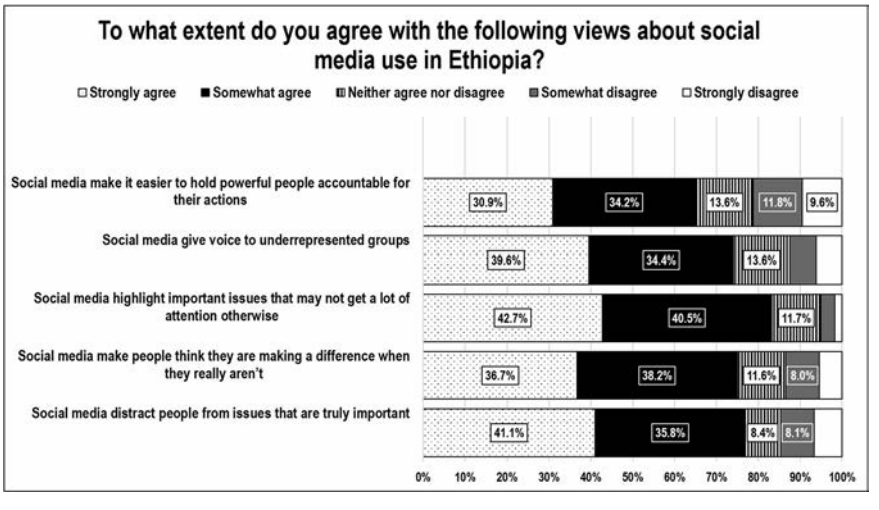

Figure 5. Perceptions of educated Ethiopians on different perspectives of social media's role on democratic values.

global social movements like the Arab Spring, and how that created hope for young Ethiopians who were early adopters of social media, particularly Facebook:

> I was on Facebook for the past seven to eight years actively participating in social activism. I remember the days when I saw Facebook as a tool of hope. Around 2010/2011, social media projected a very hopeful future amongst the activist community in Ethiopia. Even if its accessibility was not big and the government routinely shut down Internet access, the discourse about Facebook was very optimistic. The people who actively participated on Facebook at the time were notable opinion leaders and trustworthy individuals who garnered a lot of respect for their journalistic work. In a sense, the early social media political influencers mirrored critical opinion leaders of the offline journalistic environment. I and my partners did several political campaigns that garnered significant attention and have drawn young people to social media. Because the economic aspect of Facebook was not well known at that time, people shared and produced quality and incisive content without being intrusive and indulging in clickbait culture that is so pervasive now. It is because of this hopeful spirit that I and my colleagues entered into political activism utilizing digital tools. (personal communication, 2 May 2019)

While the hopeful rhetoric regarding social media's nurturance of democratic values has diminished from a journalistic and principled activism standpoint, there is no doubt that social media opened a door for many to participate in political discourse. However, scale of participation by itself is not an authoritative indicator of an impending democratic culture. In the Ethiopian context, social media users' behavior to create strong ingroup cohesion at the expense of fraught outgroup engagement has amplified existing collective identity fissures, most notably in the ethno-political sphere, to the detriment of dialogue. According to a journalist who describes herself as an active participant in Ethiopian Facebook political discourse, Facebook 'has come too soon' to Ethiopia in a sense that it 'caught the nation's moral compass off-guard.' She further argues:

> The problem is that Facebook took over before we have built any meaningful journalistic, educational, and civic institutions that could have created the foundation for an intentional and rationale deliberative culture built on evidence-based approach. As a result, what we have now is a generation that doesn't have a shared knowledge linchpin to look up to in order to measure up what is true and what is not, what is real and what is imagined. When you have a critical mass of Facebook users that are pseudo-literate, and by that I am referring to people who may be educated in the formal sense of the word but do not have the repertoire of tools to independently and critically examine the modes and motivations of the production of information, the result is false consciousness and chaos borne out of misinformation, manipulation, and groupthink. (personal communication, 17 October 2019)

This concern over the Ethiopian social media landscape is very strongly supported by the survey results. Respondents overwhelmingly reported they are 'very concerned' about hate speech, incitement of violence, political extremism and partisanship, and fake news and misinformation (Figure 6). The emergence of 'hate speech' as the most concerning component of social media is probably unsurprising as the survey was conducted at a time when Ethiopia experienced its highest record of internally displaced persons (IDPs), the majority of whom were attributed to ethnic conflicts. It should be noted that the discourse over hate speech has also gone mainstream as the Ethiopian government adopted a hate speech legislation recently.

Without being dismissive about the predicaments of outrage communication, some informants warned against 'elitist interpretation' that fails to consider that the vast

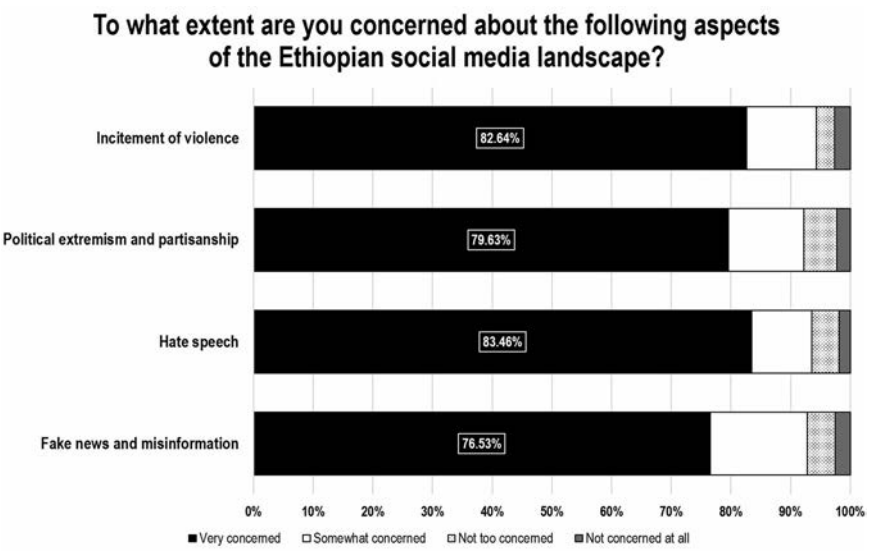

Figure 6. Educated Ethiopians' major concerns over the Ethiopian social media landscape.

majority of those using SNS platforms such as Facebook are there for apolitical aims, such as entertainment, dating, and social support. This is consistent with Kumlachew's (2014) study that attributes Facebook use amongst urbanite Ethiopians mostly to 'entertainment, socialization, and emotional release functions' (p. 99).

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the role of social media during and after the Ethiopian protests that resulted in a chain of political reforms in 2018. Specifically, it examined the ways in which Ethiopians used social media platforms during the Ethiopian protests, the evolution of political discourse in the post-protest period as it pertains to outrage communication in social media, and the implications of ethno-political organizing on social media platforms for democratization and nation-building. Regarding social media's role during protests, results showed educated Ethiopian mostly refrained from active participation. For this demographic, social media platforms were used mostly as gateways to obtain news and information related to the protests rather than platforms to organize for offline civic activities. Despite SNSs' emergence as formidable platforms that shape Ethiopia's political discourse, the stake of academicians and social thinkers in the transaction of ideas and debates seem minimal due to the negative perception of SNSs such as Facebook as 'chaotic' and 'irrational.' In the post-protest period, the mode of organization on the Ethiopian social media landscape took a distinctly ethno-political form that resulted in ingroup cohesiveness by ethnic identity but undermined outgroup engagement, oftentimes amounting to outrage communication and divisiveness. Although survey results overwhelmingly portrayed a pessimistic view of Ethiopian social media's political discourse culture, data generated from interviews dispute this line of argument by highlighting the opportunities SNSs afforded to formerly marginalized groups to organize and celebrate their cultural heritage and collectively chart their future political and economic

aspirations. Finally, the study offered some significant implications for democratization and nation building as Ethiopia undergoes a highly contested politics of nationhood and citizenship marked by state fragility. While there is strong evidence of the role SNSs played in drawing a sizable number of Ethiopians into political discourse, there is no guarantee such increase in participation is contributing to the cultivation of democratic values. In the Ethiopian context, Facebook's outsized role in protest communication is dwarfed by its inability to foster a national framework of shared citizenship. This phenomenon, I argue, encapsulates the concept of outrage communication. Drawn from the philosophical tenets of moral outrage (e.g., Crockett, 2017) and my findings in this study, I propose outrage communication, in the context of competing collective identities, denotes antagonistic communicative performances that outsource wrongdoing to the 'other' in a manner that absolves intra-group members from misconduct and ascribes culpability on adversaries – who are often imagined – in other groups.[11]

As I indicated earlier, the study's confinement of recruiting survey participants and interviewees from certain sections of Ethiopian SNSs' diverse demographic is a key limitation. Nevertheless, there are key insights this study offers in engaging with scholarship related to social media and political communication in Ethiopia. Firstly, I argue that the research agenda for engaging with Ethiopian SNSs as platforms for political discourse is better served with less attention to cohesiveness and more consideration to understanding. For example, the study by Gagliardone et al. (2016) that conducted a content analysis of Facebook posts, status updates, and comments was instructive in making a distinction between hate speech and other forms of antagonistic expressions and concluded that the occurrence of the former is much more lower than expected. The results from the current research suggest widespread anxiety about occurrences of hate speech in Ethiopia. This can be partly attributed to the Ethiopian Facebook environment experiencing increased occurrences of inflammatory as well as hate speech in the post-protest period that might have contributed to widespread displacements and conflicts.[12] Another rationale to consider here is methodological disparities. In the context of the population surveyed in this study, *perception* on the prevalence of hate speech is quite substantial. This leads to my second point, which is that deploying a wide range of methodological tools, both quantitative and qualitative, leads to a more robust understanding of the Ethiopians' social media use in the context of political communication. This is evident in recent scholarship that engaged with issues of political participation, hate speech, and collective identity on Ethiopia's SNS platforms from a wide range of perspectives and methodological approaches (e.g., Gagliardone et al., 2016; Mossie & Wang, 2018; Skjerdal & Gebru, 2020). The findings of these studies, including the current one, are consistent in some ways and not so much so in others. This is indicative of the fast-paced dynamism of political discourse in the Ethiopian SNS ecosystem and the need for scholarly inquiries to capture this dynamism through a variety of methodological and epistemological approaches. Finally, I argue that emerging studies that interrogate political discourses on SNSs in Ethiopia (and we need so much more!) should vigorously engage with the various political, social, cultural, and linguistic contexts in which online narratives take place. Without integrated inquiries that meaningfully traverse between text and context, we risk erring on the side of oversubscribing to the impacts of the digital on the offline and vice versa.

Notes

1. See Barata (2019) for recent youth identity-based organization and movements in Ethiopia.
2. My use of 'post-protest period' throughout the article represents the timeframe after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed office on 2 April 2018. The term *does not* indicate absence of protests after 2 April 2018. In the context of this study, it is used to signify the end of EPRDF's domination and emergence of the party's internal power realignment.
3. My choice of 'identity' in lieu of 'tribalism' or 'ethnicity' is informed by the sense of agency it carries to individuals/groups referenced in the study. I find Mamdani's (1996, p. 185) notes on the colonial and postcolonial implications of these terms particularly insightful.
4. The study also integrates some Facebook posts into the analysis for illustrative purposes. Note that the use of these artifacts is only complementary and does not represent a major data generation method.
5. *Irreecha* is the thanksgiving holiday of the Oromo People in Ethiopia. It is celebrated annually with a large public gathering at the sacred grounds of Hora Harsadi (Lake Harsadi) in Bishoftu, Oromia Regional State. In 2019, the major Irreecha festival was held for the first time in Addis Ababa.
6. Although $n = 688$, the difference across aggregate rows is attributed to non-response by some respondents in specific categories.
7. For example, note how the profile of participants is skewed toward certain demographics in the categories of educational status and nationalistic identification (Table 1). Respondents are predominantly male, hold advanced degrees, and identify with their Ethiopian identity over their ethnic affiliation. This is a key limitation of the survey, the results of which cannot be generalized. The purposive online recruitment technique renders itself for a possibility of some groups to be represented more than others. This is mitigated in the generation of qualitative data where respondents are recruited from diverse political, ethnic and gender backgrounds.
8. Levine's (1999) work is a good example that illustrates 'constructivist' propositions on belonging and identity in Ethiopia.
9. Derived from the name Oromo, *Oromummaa*, according to Megerssa (2014), can be defined as 'all those elements that constitute the Oromo personality' (p. 92).
10. Of or belonging to the Tigrayan ethnolinguistic group.
11. This attempt to define outrage communication is also informed by Anderson's (2006) conceptualizations on the role of media in fortifying nationalism movements.
12. Note that Ethiopia has recently adopted a hate speech regulatory framework in response to, per the government, rising hate speech occurrences (see Workneh, 2020).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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